

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center

Dear partner in school emergency preparedness,

In response to your request for information from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on what schools that are concerned about an active shooter using a fire alarm to lure students out of school buildings should do, the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Office of Safe and Healthy Students (OSHS) and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center would like to provide you with the following considerations.

We understand the concern that teachers, administrators, students, and their families may have about participation in fire drills, especially in light of the recent events in Florida and the opportunity they provide for others to cause harm. Schools and school districts may be required to conduct fire drills to meet state and local law and requirements, including those from the local Fire Marshall, and to reduce issues of liability. However, they should also be held due to their proven effectiveness--holding regular fire drills is one reason why fatalities caused by school building fires are rare.¹ Before fire drills were regularly held, there were instances of scores of students being killed by school building fires. For example, a fire at the Our Lady of the Angels School in Chicago, IL in 1958 caused the deaths of 58.²

In addition, regular emergency exercises, such as drills:

- Promote school and community preparedness;
- Develop effective relationships with community partners, such as law enforcement and the fire department, that are invaluable in a real emergency;
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of school staff and community partners;
- Assess the availability of resources and capabilities to respond to emergencies; and
- Identify areas in need of improvement.

While there may be concerns about an active shooter taking advantage of a fire drill to inflict harm on others, it is worth keeping in mind that building fires are far more likely to occur than active shooter events in schools. On average there are 2 active shooter incidents each year in schools³ compared to more than 3,000 structural fires on school properties.⁴ As such, schools should continue to be prepared for building fires, including through conducting regular exercises.

Several actions can be taken to mitigate the risk of an active shooter—or any aggressor—attacking students and staff as they exit buildings in a drill or real emergency. The whole school community should be taught that they may need to adapt their response based on how an exercise scenario or real emergency unfolds. For example, if the typical evacuation route from a building is inaccessible due to a building fire in that area, they should be trained to take an alternative route. Similarly, they may need to take an alternative route if there is a human-caused threat along their evacuation route. And, as there are many variables to every situation, teachers and staff members in an emergency should feel empowered by their administration to make their own decision about what response actions would be best if confronted with danger. In the case of an aggressor taking advantage of a fire alarm, it may be safer for teachers and their students to run away from the classroom (e.g., if an aggressor is far away from their location and they have a safe place to move to); or it may be safer for them to lock their room door and hide where they are (e.g., if an aggressor is close, there is no risk from a building fire, and there is an effective way to secure the room where the teacher and students will be hiding).

There are several additional ways to mitigate risks from human-caused threats during drills:

- Conduct unannounced drills that occur at different times of the day (and not just when students are in class).

- Hold exercises with the visible presence of community partners, such as law enforcement and the fire department, if they are available.
 - While not focused on fire drills, your planning team and you may also want to review the document [Best Practice Considerations for Schools in Active Shooter and Other Armed Assailant Drills](#), which was released by the National Association of School Psychologists and National Association of School Resource Officers. The resource contains valuable information such as developmental and mental health considerations, and steps to conducting safe, effective, and appropriate drills (see pages 6 and 8).
- Ensure redundancy of communication. Whenever fire alarms are activated in response to an actual building fire, the response team can use the PA system—which should have restricted access—to deliver the message that it is not a drill and courses of action, including updated instructions, if necessary. The whole school community should be trained to listen for these instructions. Teachers and staff can also be equipped with two-way radios to communicate during an emergency, including providing updates and situational awareness to the response team.

As an example of how one state is addressing this issue, please see the accompanying document titled, “Fire alarm response memo,” which was released by the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control, the Colorado School Safety Resource Center, and Colorado Information Analysis Center.

We hope that you find the information above helpful. If you have any additional questions or would like to continue the conversation, please do not hesitate to contact the REMS TA Center toll-free at 1-855-781-REMS [7367] or info@remstacenter.org. Since 2004, the REMS TA Center has provided free resources and other support to schools, school districts, institutions of higher education, local and state education authorities, and other stakeholders to help them create high-quality emergency operations plans and preparedness programs that address a variety of security, safety, and emergency management issues. Support is provided for all aspects of preparedness, including activities for before, during, and after an incident and for components such as the social, emotional and behavioral; academic; physical and structural; and business functions of educational entities. For additional resources and information on school preparedness, please visit the REMS TA Center [Website](#). We also encourage you to sign up for the REMS TA Center newsletter, which you can do by calling or emailing us, and follow us on [Twitter](#).

Sincerely,

Paul Myers, PHD, CEM
 Director, Research & Development
 REMS TA Center



If you have questions or need additional assistance, please contact the REMS TA Center at
 (855) 781-REMS (7367) or info@remstacenter.org.
[@remstacenter](#) <https://remstacenter.org>



¹ [Statistical reports on the U.S. fire problem](#) (U.S. Fire Administration).

² [School fires with 10 or more deaths](#) (National Fire Protection Association [NFPA]).

³ Between 2000 and 2016, there were 33 incidents of active shooters in schools. [Quick Look: 220 Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000-2016](#) (Federal Bureau of Investigation).

⁴ Between 2011-2015 there was an annual average of 3,430 fires in nursery, elementary, middle, or high schools. [Structure Fires in Educational Properties](#) (NFPA).